

THE EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM (EAS)

History

"This is a test of the Emergency Alert System—this is only a test..."

You will occasionally hear or see these words on your local television or cable station.

In 1951, President Harry Truman established CONELRAD (Control of Electromagnetic Radiation) as the first national alerting system. Under CONELRAD, radio stations were required to broadcast only on certain frequencies during an emergency alert. This prevented an enemy from attacking by using transmissions from broadcast stations as a guide for their target.

CONELRAD later became the "Emergency Broadcast System" (EBS). The EBS was designed to provide the President with a means to address the American people in the event of a national emergency. Through the EBS, the President had access to thousands of broadcast stations to send an emergency message to the public.

In 1994, to overcome some of the limitations of the older EBS system, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) replaced the EBS with the Emergency Alert System (EAS). The major difference between EBS and EAS is the method used to alert broadcast stations about an incoming message.

The EAS provides not only the President, but national, state and local authorities, with the ability to give emergency information to the general public via broadcast stations, cable and wireless cable systems. While participation in national EAS alerts is mandatory for these providers, state and local area EAS participation is voluntary.

The FCC and EAS

The FCC designed the EAS in cooperation with the National Weather Service (NWS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Each of these agencies plays an important role. The FCC provides information to broadcasters, cable system operators, and other participants in the EAS regarding the technical and operational requirements of the EAS. Additionally, the FCC ensures that state and local EAS plans conform to the FCC's rules and regulations. The NWS provides emergency weather information to alert the public about dangerous conditions. FEMA provides direction for state and local emergency planning officials to plan and implement their roles in the EAS.

The EAS uses state-of-the-art digital technology to distribute messages. The system provides state and local officials with a method to quickly send out important local emergency information targeted to a specific area. Also, the EAS digital signal is the same signal that the National Weather Service (NWS) uses on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Weather Radio (NWR). This allows NWR signals to be decoded by the EAS equipment at broadcast stations and cable systems. Broadcasters and cable operators can then send NWS weather warning messages almost immediately to their audiences.



EAS allows broadcast stations, cable systems, participating satellite companies, and other services to send and receive emergency information quickly and automatically, even if these facilities are unattended. EAS was designed so that if one link in the dissemination of alert information is broken, the entire system does not fail. EAS also automatically converts to any language used by the broadcast station or cable system.

Also, specially equipped consumer products, such as televisions, radios, pagers and other devices, can decode EAS messages. Consumers can program these products to “turn themselves on” for the messages they want to receive.

Finally in 1997, EAS replaced the weekly (on-air) “only a test” broadcast notifications used by the EBS with less obtrusive weekly internal tests and monthly on-air tests. All AM, FM, and TV broadcast stations, as well as cable systems, with 10,000 or more subscribers, use these procedures.

The ultimate goal of the EAS is to disseminate emergency information as quickly as possible to the people who need it.

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